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ABSTRACT

Student interest in individual events in intercollegiate forensics competition is on the rise in the United States. Not only does the individual events tournament format reward depth of analysis, it also rewards students' abilities to transfer their critical insights into appropriate physical and vocal cues. The individual events tournament provides oral interpretation students with feedback concerning their ability to make the written word come alive for an audience, and with a broader spectrum of critical reactions because of the diversity of the people evaluating the performance of literature. Another benefit of forensic competition is the opportunity to compete in a wide variety of interpretation categories--from the genre-specific solo interpretations to the mixed interpretation events where students combine several selections from different genres. Many tournaments also allow students to work with others in dramatic duo interpretation and/or readers theatre. Additional tournament benefits include opportunities to observe others and to experience and test others' modes of communication. As such, intercollegiate tournaments provide a setting for the expansion of the educational goals of oral interpretation training. (HOD)

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Position Paper:

The Value of Forensic Competition for Oral Interpretation Students

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Position Paper:
The Value of Forensic Competition for
Oral Interpretation Students

There can be little doubt that undergraduate interest in intercollegiate individual events competition is on the rise in the United States. During 1968-1969, 7.6% of the college tournaments held in the country were totally individual events oriented.[1] By 1979-1980, that percentage had risen to 29.7%, with 66.6% of all college tournaments including individual events.[2] The magnitude of student interest can be seen in the fact that during the 1978-1979 academic year, there were 43,976 participants in intercollegiate forensic activities and as many as 3,187 in a single weekend.[3] During 1979-1980, over 700 interpretation events were held at intercollegiate tournaments throughout the United States.[4] In addition, Faules et al. notes that "the trend in recent years has definitely been to increase the interest in contests and decrease the interest in noncompetitive activities."[5] Given this dramatic rise in student interest and participation in individual events tournaments, it seems vital to examine the values of forensic competition for college students. This paper will specifically explore the values for the student of oral interpretation. At the outset, it is important to recognize what this paper will not do. It will not attempt to evaluate the relative merits of the various co-curricular outlets for oral interpretation students. Rather, it will look at what educational goals the forensic activity does contain.

Rewards Depth of Analysis and Clarity of Communication:

While some critics of intercollegiate competition would question the desirability or even the feasibility of ranking and rating the

performance of works of art, it cannot be denied that the contest format fosters intensive study of literature. Certainly one goal of any educational training in oral interpretation is to bring about a fuller understanding of a literary work through close analysis. The competitive format most often prods the student into more than a cursory understanding of a literary piece. If one accepts the notion that one first must completely understand the work before giving it "voice," then the clearer the analysis, the better the chances the interpreter will have later of convincing the critic-judge. Also, the process develops the student's ability to adapt literature to a given time period. If the student neglects to understand fully all of the intricacies of the work or neglects to adapt carefully the work, the resultant performance will indeed be "full of sound and fury signifying nothing."

Not only does the tournament format reward depth of analysis, it also rewards students' ability to transfer their critical insights into appropriate physical and vocal cues. It is only through intensive and prolonged practice that the interpreter can hope to present a clear and cohesive performance that will be evaluated as the "best."

Provides Critical Evaluation:

The individual events tournament also provides oral interpretation students with feedback concerning their ability to make the written word come alive for an audience. Depending on the particular tournament, this feedback may either be in written and/or oral form. Students thus learn not only how the critic-judge evaluated their performances relative to the other contestants (through rank and rating), but also why. Depending on the tournament, the student may receive written and/or oral feedback

from between two and eighteen critic-judges in each category of competition in which the student is entered.

While some opponents of intercollegiate tournament competition would probably argue that all judges are not "experts" in oral interpretation, that fact could be viewed as a positive attribute of the competitive setting. The student has the opportunity to obtain evaluations from not only the isolated experts in oral interpretation, but also from other professionals in the communication discipline both from within and outside the academic environment. As such, the diversity of people evaluating the performance of literature can provide the student of oral interpretation with a broader spectrum of critical reactions. These critical reactions provide the student with reactions to the selection of literature and its adaptation as well as its vocal and physical communication. Students can use these reactions to help determine how their effectiveness as communicators of literature might be improved.

Allows for Growth through a Variety of Interpretation Events:

Another value of forensic competition for students interested in oral interpretation is the opportunity to compete in a wide variety of interpretation categories. There are genre-specific events for the solo interpreter--prose, poetry, and drama--as well as "mixed" interpretation events where the student combines several selections from different genre. Many intercollegiate tournaments also allow students to work with others through dramatic duo interpretation and/or readers theatre. Students can choose to work in one or many interpretation events based on the level of their abilities. Thus in intercollegiate competition, the student has the opportunity to develop facility in both solo and group performances of literature.

Students can use the reactions of the critic-judges to help them come to a closer realization of the work through continued work and presentation at subsequent tournaments. In addition, the student has the freedom based on the reactions of the critic-judges to continue perfecting a given selection or to begin the process of selection, analysis, adaptation, and performance of a different text.

The rules of the various competitive solo interpretation events are such that the student can experiment within a given event with one selection or a combination of selections from various sources. Thus the student can choose to present only one selection in a given event, while develop a program based around a theme with appropriate introduction and transitions that bind the various selections together in another event.

Provides Opportunity for Observation of Others:

Like any effective system for the teaching of oral interpretation, the intercollegiate tournament provides students with the opportunity to experience "new" literature as well as to improve as communicators of literature through the observation of others. Through observation of their peers in rounds of competition, the oral interpretation student can be exposed to a wide variety of literature and authors. Also, development of effective communication skills can be learned by the student from the observation of both the contestant who doesn't manage to get the literature across to the audience as well as those who do. By analyzing the "unsuccessful" reader, the student can evaluate what methods of approaching a literary work aren't effective. This can often be as valuable as observing the skillful performance of those interpreters in a final round of competition. Certainly by watching both the "good" and the

"bad," interpreters can begin to evaluate for themselves not only what makes for an effective communication between reader and audience but also what tends to impede the process.

Provides Opportunity to Experience and Test Other Modes of Communication:

A significant value of the forensic tournament outlet for oral interpretation students is the lack of isolation from other modes of oral communication. Intercollegiate tournaments allow students to observe quality performance in "original" events as well as the interpreter's "re-creative" events. Oral interpretation students can not only observe but participate in such events as persuasive speaking, informative speaking, and rhetorical criticism, as well as limited preparation speaking in extemporaneous and impromptu speaking. If the goal of a liberal education is exposure to more than an isolated discipline, oral interpretation students have much to gain from exposure and/or experience with these other forms of communication. Training in developing and structuring "original" events can only serve to strengthen the education of oral interpretation students. Also, the image of the oral interpretation discipline can be enhanced by being observed by others in the communication field.

The goals of developing a heightened sense of the beauty and intricate nature of literature and developing the ability to re-create the excitement for literature in others is contained in the intercollegiate tournament. Becoming a finalist or winning a trophy in any interpretation event is not the end goal but only a means by which excellence is rewarded; excellence is the ability to communicate a literary work in its intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic entirety to an audience.

While participation in intercollegiate tournaments does provide students with an outlet to test and develop their oral interpretation abilities, it has never claimed to be the "best," but only one of several outlets. Possibly the best training for oral interpretation students is through experiencing a variety of outlets for their development, appreciation, and sharing of literature with others. As such, intercollegiate tournaments provide one such setting for the expansion of the educational goals of oral interpretation training. As Samuel Becker, Past President of the Speech Communication Association remarked, "Years of observing high school and college students in forensics have convinced me that this is one of the major contributions we in speech communication can make to the education of youngsters."[6]

ENDNOTES

[1]Jack H. Howe, ed., Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results, XIX (1979-80), p. 76.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Jack H. Howe, ed., Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results, XVIII (1978-79), pp. 103-104.

[4]Jack H. Howe, ed., Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results, XIX (1979-80), pp. 97-98.

[5]Don F. Faules, Richard D. Rieke, and Jack Rhodes, Directing Forensics (Denver, Colorado: Morton Publishing Co., 1976), p. 58.

[6]Samuel L. Becker, "Research Needs in Forensic Communication," cited in James McBath, ed., Forensics as Communication: The Argumentative Perspective (Skokie, Ill: National Textbook Co., 1975), p. 59.